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TO: Task Force to Study Legal Disputes Involving the Care & Custody of
Minor Children

FROM: Attorney Aaron P. Wenzloff

ON BEHALF OF: New Haven Legal Assistance Association, Inc. and other legal services
programs in Connecticut

DATE: January 9, 2014

RE: The extent of noncompliance with C.G.S. § 46b-56(c)(6) and the role of
the court in enforcing compliance; the role of a guardian ad litem and the
attorney for a minor child

Members of the Task Force, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Aaron Wenzloff, and I am a staff attorney at New Haven Legal Assistance Association where I represent low-income clients in family cases. I am offering testimony about the role of a guardians ad litem in family court and about Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-56.

As a legal services attorney, I represent poor people in contested divorce and custody cases. In particular, we prioritize representing clients who have been victims of domestic violence, many of whom have young children. In our cases, which are challenging, the assistance of a GAL or an AMC is often indispensable. On the whole, the legal services community feels that the GAL and AMC system is important and valuable for our client population.

At the same time, there are opportunities to make the system for appointing GALs and AMCs better and more transparent. Most parents who enter into family court do not know initially what a GAL is, or what they should expect from a GAL. Providing plain-language information in pamphlets to parents who have had a GAL or AMC appointed would help parties understand what to expect and how to react to such an appointment.

Second, many GALs do an excellent job; others do not. Yet, there is no official set of professional standards in Connecticut for GALs or AMCs to guide their conduct. Other states (for example, Massachusetts) have official written standards to improve uniformity and consistency in GAL investigations and conduct. Connecticut would benefit from comprehensive written standards, similar to the rules of professional responsibility for attorneys, so GALs know what is expected of them to perform competently and ethically.